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ABSTRACT

New patterns of organization are required to make openspace work in order to achieve the individual learning goals of students working at their own level, seeking information independently, and interacting freely with other students when required. A comparison of the traditional classroom with what is happening in the more "open" openrooms reveals that the roles of both teachers and students have altered. New roles require new norms to coordinate them and, although many of the new rules of the classroom may no longer apply, there are still rules for the student to learn while he is in the openroom. However, because of the greatly increased autonomy of the student, these new norms must be more general in what they specify. Instead of letting discussion of the open plan idea degenerate into a classroom-versus-openrooms debate, the whole variety of learning situations that are possible in a school should be evaluated. (Author)

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FOREWORD

In early 1971 Mr. Geoffrey Cooke, a graduate student, visited 13 open plan schools in southern Ontario and an equal number of schools with conventional architecture. In York County he spent some time with the grade 7 teachers and pupils at Meadowbrook and Sharon Public Schools.

From his thesis, "Teachers' Roles and Structural Differentiation," Mr. Cooke prepared a 34-page summary report for the boards which cooperated in his study. From that summary certain passages of special relevance to York County have been selected for this synopsis.

Every attempt has been made to retain Mr. Cooke's basic observations and conclusions. The fuller report is available from the

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PROBLEMS OF TEACHER-STUDENT ORGANISATION IN OPENROOMS

by Geoffrey Cooke, Department of Sociology
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Last year I visited thirteen 'open-plan' schools in southern Ontario which were operating openrooms for Grade 7. As part of the same study I also went to 13 regular schools. I was very kindly treated by teachers and principals who discussed their problems with me quite frankly and perceptively. . . .

I think you might be interested to read this general summary of what I saw and how I think we can explain the current sources of difficulty in establishing and organising openrooms.

As there will be some classroom teachers who are not familiar with openrooms, it is worth describing briefly how they are different and how they came to be introduced in local elementary and senior public schools. The essential impetus to open schools came from the fact that there has been a broadening of curricula in recent years which has meant that our schools are attempting new goals. The most dramatic single reminder of this was the appearance of the 'Living and Learning' report in 1968 and it is very significant that the first openrooms appeared locally around that time. There has been a feeling that the classroom, for all its proven advantages is not entirely adequate as a learning situation with which to attain these goals and consequently there was a search for an alternative to the 'egg-crate' school composed of single-teacher classrooms. This in itself was a radical enough move because in the past we have been quite content to rely exclusively on the classroom whatever the changes in the curriculum may have been. In these last few years however, many educationalists have come to realise that one of the most important 'technical' facilities we have at our disposal is the actual physical lay-out of the school itself if we can utilise it to help us attain our various learning goals. New architectural techniques and materials have also given school designers extra opportunities to plan for the different and imaginative learning environments within which to implement programs.

This new awareness of the link between curricula or goals, and school design is demonstrated by the decision a few years ago to employ one new basic design for all elementary schools being built in the Metro Toronto area. This was the 'SEF' school whose specifications were drawn up by the Study of Educational Facilities unit here in Toronto. It made a striking departure from the egg-crate school in that its internal space was divided, not into banks of regular classrooms, but into areas of various sizes and shapes to accommodate a variety of alternate learning situations. As well as having smaller seminar-type rooms, this school includes several 'openrooms' which are wider areas that allow from two to five teachers to work together with very large groups of students. The decision to build this school exclusively over a four year period involved thirty-eight million dollars so we must ask why such a design was chosen and why a rationalised or modular version of the classroom school was not built instead. The answer lies in the fact that the very design of a school is itself another item of educational technology which we have available to us as teachers. If we limit ourselves to classrooms only, then we limit our technology to what classrooms offer. Consequently, we cannot satisfactorily attain many of the goals called for by our broader curricula and programs.

So far we have two of the broad categories of components which we put together in carrying out a particular educational strategy: that concerned with goals and curricula and that concerned with facilities and materials. Admittedly, the connection between the two has not always been well stated in the rationale behind establishing open schools but this is gradually becoming clearer through the trials and errors of teachers who are trying to make them work. This is where the third major component of educational strategies comes in and this concerns the organisation of the learning situation. Most important, this involves what the teachers and the student do with the facilities and materials to actually achieve the goals of the curriculum. When the openroom was introduced there was to be something different about each of these components. First the new open area was to enable the school to attempt certain new goals that had been rather hard to achieve in the classroom. It was intended that we would now have a more suitable setting for each student to work in at his own individual level, to seek out information independently, and to interact freely with other students when required. Second, the new facility of open space was supposed to let students make better use of other items of learning technology, that is, it could embrace a range of instructional equipment and material which the student could explore and use at will. Now, in putting these two sets of components together we enter the third category and this involves the social organisation of the learning situation. In addition, we could also identify a fourth set of components made up of beliefs, attitudes, ideology, and values which also operate there but my main concern has been to analyse the social arrangements that are set up between teachers and students in the openrooms. Right now, the most interesting question to me is what new patterns of organisation are required to make openspace work and achieve the new goals of learning we are aiming for. . . .

We can place this range of internal organisation in the twenty-six separate openrooms which I saw along one broad dimension. At one end there is what I would call a genuinely 'Open' pattern where students are no longer permanently set in classes. Instead, grouping varies over the school day between the occasional large-group presentation in front of all students and, far more frequently, periods of quite independent activity by the students individually. In this latter form or organisation teachers may never give lessons to class-sized groups. Rather, their contact is with small groups, often casually formed, or individual students who work at their own pace utilising various pieces of self-instructional material. The familiar teaching situation as we know it may only occur with very small groups and even then, only spontaneously as the need arises.

From such an openroom at one end of this dimension of 'openness' we can move through other local examples identifying the 'Open' situation and the extent to which it is used. In the senior school this often depends on what subject areas the openroom is used for. In one school an openroom might be equipped exclusively for social studies subjects or for math or language with the intention that when students use it, organisation is along the very fluid 'open' lines we have described. Of course, this particular strand might also be supplemented by other learning situations including work in the regular self-contained classroom. In another school an openroom might be used for several subject areas, if not most of them. Again, the openroom might be the only spatial setting used or others, like the seminar room or classroom, might be used as well.

However, as we pass along this dimension of openness to its other extreme we see the Open pattern of organisation used less and less. Finally, we reach the point where the openroom contains nothing more than several 'classroom' groups coexisting side by side. Each is a traditional teaching situation with students listening to the lessons of their own teacher. I call this the 'Regressive' openroom because in spite of the open space setting there has been a retreat to traditional classroom organisation. There may well be more sharing of material by teachers but independent activity by individual students is greatly restricted. In the extreme case students are confined to their seats for the whole time; and for a large part of this, each full class is in the face-to-face situation before its teacher. Not surprisingly, teachers in these openrooms often feel that open space offers no advantages over the classroom at all. And when a teacher attempts to manage his own class side by side with the classes of other teachers he is quite justified in wishing for the return of walls to separate them all again into self-contained classrooms. This phenomenon of the Regressive classroom reminds us that space itself does not inevitably bring with it a certain organisation. . . .

We can see why phrases like 'open plan' and 'open concept' may mean different things to different people. Sometimes the architectural aspect may be stressed to the point where it is assumed that conventional classroom organisation is merely to be transplanted in the openroom. Indeed some school planners may have overemphasised openspace in building earlier schools almost exclusively of openrooms. Understandably the change away from the eggcrate school has tended to couch the question of school learning situations in terms of classrooms or openrooms. This would be an unfortunate restriction because we need to see each of them as one of a number of learning situations having different characteristics and usefulness which we bring into educational strategies as demanded by our goals.

Sometimes a regular school with a good deal of activity work in its classrooms may describe itself as having an 'open' program although the physical setting remains unchanged; this is the sense in which Herman Kohl described his 'open classroom.' Then, to others the 'open' idea largely means an extremely free liberal regime in the school, whatever its design. Openrooms in this case are characterised by very loose norms governing student behaviour while the actual learning goals are little different to those of traditional schools, except that they are not so well realised. Many of the difficulties we are presently having in running our openrooms may stem from the failure of administrators to communicate to teachers and principals an integrated rationale for the new schools they are asking their teachers to operate. Probably the rationale for open schools has never really been spelled out, even when they were being planned. To my mind, this needs the specifications of at least three components: appropriate physical space and abundant instructional material, a commitment to certain curricula goals concerning individual learning and progress, and a form of teacher-student organisation that is radically different to that of the traditional classrooms. We can now examine this last component more closely from a sociological perspective. . . .

If we compare the traditional classroom with what is happening in the more 'open' openrooms we are struck by the fact that the roles of both teachers and students

have altered dramatically. Teachers deliver lessons to classes much less frequently and students are less likely to be found sitting silently receiving such lessons. Instead the openroom teacher loses much of his instructional or strictly 'teaching' function and takes more responsibility for coordinating student activity generally while assisting the individual student when needed. Correspondingly the student has actually picked up some of the teacher's previous functions by independently using various instructional material to 'teach' himself. . . .

Teachers no longer exert the same control over the specific behaviour of students that was possible in the classroom teaching situation. They do not correct students so frequently for restlessness, for 'talking out' or talking to each other, displays of temper or 'goofing off' and so on. But although students may no longer be confined in fixed positions before a teacher their movement and activities must nevertheless be regulated in response to teachers' directions. New roles require new norms to coordinate them and although many of the new rules of the classroom may no longer apply, there are still rules for the student to learn while he is in the openroom. However, because of the greatly increased autonomy of the student these new norms must be more general in what they specify. When the student is out of sight it is impossible to control many of the behaviours that preoccupy us in managing a classroom but in the openroom situation they are not so critical. The most important point here is that unless we are maintaining a classroom situation there is no need for such tight control over student impulses. So this very familiar set of rules which includes 'looking to the front,' 'no whispering,' 'sitting still,' and so on disappears in the more 'open' openroom. However the absence of these rules is quite disturbing to many outsiders when they first see this type of organisation. A teacher or principal who has previously spent a large part of his working life maintaining these rules in his own classroom could be forgiven for being taken aback by the absence of these constraints.

It would be especially upsetting though, where the Regressive pattern of organisation had been established. If adjacent classes were operating simultaneously under very loose norms the degree of interference and confusion experienced by all concerned would be quite severe. Sometimes this happens because there is an assumption that open space must automatically call for a very free and easy set of norms without the realisation that the two roles must first be defined in a different way. Here the outsider will see the well-known structure of the classroom but with none of its customary order. More often though, such Regressive groupings in the openroom become unworkable unless a very tight set of rules is enforced in each 'classroom' situation. In fact, my own findings demonstrated greater strictness in these situations than in self-contained classrooms run on more-or-less Activity lines and quite often more strictness than in traditional classrooms! . . .

Even when a full 'open' organisation has been established and is running smoothly it may be necessary to maintain in addition to it a 'closed' classroom. This is a device used in several schools so that students who do not readily acquire the new norms can be placed in and out of the open situation depending upon their progress. It also provides a setting for the deliberate teaching of other social skills required in

the openrooms. These strategies are not retreats from Open organisation but frequently seem to be a necessary adjunct to a successful open area, at least in its early stages with new students. Where an openroom has been built without demountable walls and cannot be subdivided, or where, as was sometimes the case earlier, entire schools were built of open space with very few smaller settings, such a progression towards open organisation is not so easy. Sometimes such schools begin disastrously by being obliged to attempt an Open pattern too soon. With understandable disillusion they are forced to return to regressive or enclosed classroom situations. . . .

It requires more than open space and instructional material to run a successful Open organisation. In the first place the very fluidity of this arrangement gives teachers a massive problem of coordination and simply 'keeping track' of students and what they are doing. Any school faces the basic problem of the orderly management of hundreds of children and in the regular school one handy device for doing this has always been the class-sized group in its own room under one teacher. However when we rely too much on the one-teacher-one-class practice in the openroom we may tend to fall back on the traditional roles and teaching situations. This is understandable because the problem of orderly control of children spread over open areas is so much more difficult. . . .

If we establish our openroom to take advantage of its ability to achieve goals of individualised instruction and independent learning we cannot avoid teaching the student new rules to follow in this learning situation. Because of the nature of these new rules we simply cannot expect the same control over the specific behaviours of the student but our longstanding classroom expectations may make it difficult for us to accept that we must give up much of the direct, immediate control that we are accustomed to. In various schools we can see openrooms that are run very strictly and ones that are run very freely yet all may have the same structure of 'open' organisation. However, regardless of this degree of strictness-looseness which a particular teaching team may decide upon, open organisation does at least require rules that permit more movement and autonomy for students. This means that when we introduce openrooms properly we are also changing the rules learned by students. In choosing a certain technical means of achieving new educational goals we are at the same time obliging students to learn other new things. We cannot really have our new individual learning goals without the learning of more autonomous rules of operation.

Because this new independence and movement of students is the most striking feature of openrooms to the outsider it often becomes an over-prominent issue in the debate about the open school. When some parents see that these goals ultimately demand such radical changes in student behaviour, they are not prepared to accept it and consequently reject the new learning goals altogether. This is a common source of strain for principals in new open schools but we must be sympathetic with parents who fear that the promise of new goals may not be realised in the openroom. If there are suspicions that the basic achievement of students will not come up to that of class instruction, then new promises of a more stimulating independent learning situation may not impress parents who will instead prefer more formal organisation. Nor should we be

defensive about the possibility that attainment in some basic skills subjects may go down in openrooms which are newly established or are not adequately equipped. It is quite possible that instructional materials and equipment will eventually be evolved that will be far more efficient for the learning of math, language, and reading skills than that which we have now - even when we have enough of them. . . .

Another possibility is that the more free organisation of the openroom may be emphasised as a new goal itself. When this happens the purely social side of the situation may be stressed at the expense of curriculum goals. The student's progress towards these goals then comes less important than the fact that he is moving in a very fluid and very free social environment. In this case openness comes to be equated with more student freedom while even the new goals of individual learning may be less salient. The open school is then seen as rather like a 'free' school where formal attainment is seen as a lower priority. . . .

Rules can permit considerable independent movement, expression and autonomy while still being strictly observed. In fact, we may well prefer students to be learning these rules to those of the regular classroom, but this is a matter of goals.

This shows us that although the open organisation may at first shock those familiar only with traditional classrooms, there can still be order and students can still be responding to rules which teachers are maintaining. Whether such rules are 'loose' or 'tight' depends upon what the teachers as a team agree is suitable for their particular circumstances, in particular the numbers and social maturity of their students. . . .

Open organisation then does not mean making a fetish of freedom but it must inevitably bring with it a less restrictive code of norms. Primarily we implement it so that we can pursue various goals of individualised study allowing students to move about independently or from group to group. If we prefer this new freedom of physical movement in any case, then the openroom at the same time allows us the opportunity to implement goals in the area of what we generally call 'social learning.' This is an additional 'pay-off' because we can teach students to operate under 'remote control' instead of under the direct and immediate oversight of a teacher. . . .

Social organisation in the openroom allows us to take greater advantage of specialisation in various teaching roles. In the past our reliance on the formal teaching situation in the self-contained classroom has meant that the skills of class introduction and management have been the main ones in the teacher's repetoire. Now the open school provides a variety of settings for a variety of learning situations which demand, correspondingly, a variety of teaching roles, and hence skills. A specialisation of teacher roles is already occurring in our local openrooms and my view is that where this is emerging it is actually assisting the effectiveness of the organisation there. I believe this tendency should be encouraged. . . .

The question that really puts us on the spot is 'and what about their basic skills?'. If we are aiming for additional goals then we must be assured that open organisation in

open space at least sustains achievement in these original goals. Most teachers would expect this although it seems likely that in the early years of the new arrangement there may be a temporary falling off in these skills especially where individual material is inadequate. . . .

Distinguishing between these two sources of difficulty seems to be the starting point for principals and administrators who are concerned about the openrooms in their schools. At the moment both the novelty of the innovation and its peculiar characteristics combine to make some baffling obstacles that can be very depressing to those who are placed in an openroom and required to make it work. In the classroom school the individual teacher was often left to work out his own problems in his own situation in his own way but this is a practice that has to be altered in the open school. It is not enough for principals to select teachers who will 'fit in' on a team and leave them to it. Nor is it enough for administrators to build schools of new design and leave teachers with too little equipment and too many students. We cannot expect an open organisation to be established by encouraging the individualism of the classroom school. In fact principals may actually have to break down some of these attitudes if their openrooms are not to revert to a regressive form of organisation. It is in this area of attitudinal or ideological components that senior people are most critically placed because many of the ideas and beliefs that have kept the classroom school functioning have to be turned around and many old habits of thought have to be eliminated. . . .

Quite a few teaching teams are currently making their way without a clear map of the organisation they are trying to find but they are also handicapped by inadequate educational materials. In these circumstances teachers can be forgiven for feeling frustrated and depressed and for falling back to a heavy reliance on class teaching in the open area. The more ambivalent teachers feel about the idea, the more they begin to believe that the new goals are not worth the difficulties they are experiencing. We would expect that where an open school was new or where the teachers and students were new to it that the administration might compensate for the problems of establishment by providing additional physical facilities. Such special consideration is not always given and a heavy burden is placed upon the teachers. I found that open schools were no better off for this material than classroom schools. Instead we would have expected them to have more of it in order to build up the necessary organisation. This seems to be the most significant single item where financial resources can assist and which would benefit from rationalisation within board areas. Instructional materials are often spread very thinly by high teacher-student ratios. In 164 grade seven classes I found no difference in this ratio between established classroom schools where it was 32.1 and beginning openroom schools where it was 32.6. Moreover it is not possible in the openroom to pack in extra children and tighten up the rules a little as often happens in the classroom. Overcrowding has far more serious consequences in openspace and outside critics may reject the whole idea when they observe an openroom with such troubles. . . .

Instead of letting discussion of the open plan idea degenerate into a classroom-versus-openrooms debate we should evaluate the whole variety of learning situations

that are possible in a school. As successful openrooms emerge they will become models and once we learn to distinguish real from apparent confusion in these early years we will obtain a grasp of both the potential and limitations of the openroom. The more we know about each learning situation the more flexible and effective the school can become whatever goals we choose to pursue. . . .

February 1973